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17 March 1965

JOINT CIA-DIA-STATE MEMORANDUM

Strength of Viet Cong Military Forces in South Vietnam

Summary

1. While the Viet Cong have far fewer battalions and less manpower than the ARVN, their tactics and manner of deployment give them greater flexibility. Although the ARVN has greater mobility (e.g., air transport), the Viet Cong are able to exploit their freedom from the defense of fixed sites and their ability to infiltrate an area secretly in order to pose successive threats in widely separated areas of the country. Thus they whipsaw the ARVN general reserves, and achieve a kind of strategic superiority in combat areas of their own choosing.

2. US estimates of the confirmed strength of Viet Cong military forces in South Vietnam are based on a procedure requiring specific identification by at least two "hard" sources before accepting the existence of a Viet Cong unit. Because availability of source data lags behind the appearance of units in the field, actual Viet Cong military strength is likely to be somewhat above the confirmed figures. MACV also maintains figures on probable and suspected Viet Cong units, and on the Viet Cong militia. At times of a rapid build-up of forces, which the Viet Cong seem clearly to have been engaged in for the past year, the real picture may present a substantially greater combat threat than confirmed strength suggests.

ARMY and DIA review(s) completed.

State Department review completed

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Relative Strengths and Expansion

3. Government force strength on 15 February totaled 567,000 including 245,000 regulars. MACV's latest Viet Cong Order of Battle holdings, issued on 6 March, show a confirmed strength of 37,200 in regular, identified units. MACV has evidence that there are probably as many as 45,000 Viet Cong regulars, and reason to suspect an additional seven to eight battalions, which would put Viet Cong regular strength at between 50,000 and 60,000. In addition, the Viet Cong are estimated to have in the range of 100,000 irregular, or militia forces.

4. Government force strength has been expanded substantially since late 1961, when US assistance was dramatically increased. After showing signs of serious attrition in early 1964, government strength has been rising for about the past nine months. Training and performance have also improved, although in many areas serious deficiencies remain. Desertions by popular, regional, and even regular forces remain a problem. Although many of the deserters may ultimately return to the army, even their temporary absence weakens their units.

5. Viet Cong regular force strength has also shown a steady growth during the same period. Confirmed strength has risen by more than a third since a year ago, although this increase results in part from MACV's confirmation during the year of units already in place in late 1963. (There is a time lag between the first reports of a new unit and its acceptance in a confirmed category.) Some other of the newly confirmed units were formed largely by infiltrators who entered during the first eight months of 1964.

6. MACV's confirmed OB holdings are based on positive unit identification by at least two Viet Cong prisoners or two captured documents, or a combination. Five regimental headquarters, 50 battalions (an increase of eight since a year ago), 145 separate companies, and 35 separate platoons are presently confirmed. Reports of still unconfirmed Viet Cong

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battalions, plus actual contact in combat, indicate that there may by now be some 20 Viet Cong battalions in place in addition to the 50 listed as confirmed. There is tentative evidence of at least three Viet Cong regimental headquarters in addition to the five already confirmed. These include possibly two more in the northern provinces and one south of Saigon, where no regiments are yet confirmed but where some coordinated operations of two or more battalions have been conducted.

7. There are also indications of steady recruitment within South Vietnam for Viet Cong forces at all levels. This recruitment, together with infiltration, almost certainly offsets losses and augments force levels.

Viet Cong Capabilities

8. Since about mid-1963, there has been evidence of a fleshing-out of Viet Cong units. A Viet Cong battalion now averages 350 to 450 men with a few in excess of 600. An ARVN battalion runs about 350 men.

9. Aside from increased weapons captured from government forces, there is evidence that a growing number of Viet Cong regular main force units are being equipped with the new 7.62-mm. family of automatic and semiautomatic weapons, which offer significantly increased firepower. Use of this new bloc equipment suggests Viet Cong confidence in an outside supply system, since 7.62-mm. ammunition is not available by capture within South Vietnam. For nearly two years Viet Cong battalions have been gaining firepower in terms of mortars and recoilless rifles; mortar fire against a variety of government targets, including hamlets, is now frequent.

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Effects of Viet Cong Growth

10. The growth in military capabilities of the Viet Cong is reflected in their activities over the past year. The number of Viet Cong - initiated incidents in 1964 was about 60 percent higher than in 1963. Emphasis was on terrorist, harassing, and sabotage activity; the number of armed attacks dropped, but there were more coordinated, multiple-battalion attacks. Erosion of government control in the northern provinces, particularly in the populated coastal areas, is giving the Viet Cong increased access to manpower. This Communist encroachment has been accelerating in 1965.

11. Throughout the northern provinces, government forces are now clearly on the defensive, and in several provinces have virtually withdrawn into the district and provincial capitals, thereby largely abandoning the countryside to the Communists. A similar situation has long generally prevailed in the delta. Viet Cong interdiction of both the north-south coastal railroad and the main highway, Route 1, have been increasingly successful in isolating the north. Lateral roads in the north running toward Laos and northern Cambodia have been interdicted or subject to frequent harassment. Pacification efforts in many of the northern provinces have been abandoned in order to concentrate on defenses, and pacification throughout most of the country is stalled. Even the Hop Tac area around Saigon is being affected; one battalion has already been diverted elsewhere and one regiment is still undergoing command changes in the aftermath of the latest coup attempt.

12. Viet Cong forces are believed capable of mounting several widely scattered multiple-battalion attacks almost simultaneously. It is Viet Cong doctrine to attack at a time and place of their own choosing and only with numerical superiority. ARVN forces have the capability to meet most of these attacks with a force of regimental size, either from locally available troops or from the general reserve. Due in part to the practical difficulties of this type of warfare, ARVN forces often arrive too late or in too little force.

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ARVN Capabilities

13. The ARVN general reserve totals 11 marine and airborne battalions, plus a possible five to nine infantry battalions in the corps areas. However, these reserves are almost continually committed in one area or another. For example, almost half of the general reserve is at the moment in Binh Dinh Province, and the remainder in Phuoc Tuy Province. Their withdrawal from one commitment and deployment to another can be described as "robbing Peter to pay Paul."

14. Aside from the general reserve, most ARVN battalions not engaged in pacification activities are increasingly being committed to security operations and thus are limited in their offensive commitment against Viet Cong main force units. Neither the government's Regional Forces nor Popular Forces have the capability to relieve the ARVN for full-time commitment against the Viet Cong regulars. Many of these paramilitary units are used for static defense, and others lack the morale or strength to move in and maintain security in an area that has been cleared or is being held by the ARVN.

15. The Viet Cong, whether engaged in large-scale attacks or smaller scale harassment against government outposts, hamlets, and communications, generally have the initiative. The ARVN for the most part is reacting defensively to Viet Cong moves.

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